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INFO ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TASHKENT 001519

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

AMEMBASSY ASTANA PASS TO USOFFICE ALMATY

AMEMBASSY HELSINKI PASS TO AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG

AMEMBASSY BELGRADE PASS TO AMEMBASSY PODGORICA

AMEMBASSY ATHENS PASS TO AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2019/09/24

TAGS: PREL PHUM PGOV UZ

SUBJECT: Uzbekistan: Baptist Leader Faces Criminal Charges

CLASSIFIED BY: Holly Lindquist Thomas, Pol/Econ Officer; REASON:
1.4(B), (D)

1) (SBU) Summary: On September 17, poloff met with Pavel Peichov, Chairman of the Evangelical Christian Baptist Union in Uzbekistan. Peichov discussed the difficulties facing Baptist congregations this year, as well as the criminal allegations he himself currently faces for teaching religion to children and tax evasion, two charges arising out of a scandal this summer involving a Baptist summer camp for children. End summary.

2) (SBU) Peichov is an ethnic-Russian, but he was born and raised in Tashkent, the oldest of 12 children. He took over the chairmanship of the Evangelical Christian Baptist Union in 1994, and has held that position ever since. The Baptist Union is officially registered, but it includes 19 registered Baptist congregations and 13 unregistered congregations.

Difficulties with Registrations

3) (C) Peichov reported that since 2000, the GOU has not approved registration applications for any new congregations, and four congregations have lost their registered status. He claims there is no real basis for the denials - sometimes technicalities in the applications will be cited, sometimes applications will languish unanswered - but officials have told him that Uzbekistan is a Muslim country, and it doesn't need Christian groups. He believes this underlying belief is the real reason the GOU will not register new congregations.

4) (C) When a church submits an application for registration, it must include a list of its members, including names, addresses, and other personal information. Pavel reported that often following submission of an application, police will visit the homes of the listed individual to question (or harass) them. Because (a) they do not wish to submit their members to such practices, and (b)

they haven't successfully registered a congregation in so long, the Baptist Union is no longer pursuing registration for new congregations.

Other Difficulties

5) (SBU) Peichov stated that this year has been a difficult one, not just for Baptist congregations, but for all of the protestant groups in Uzbekistan. He mentioned the difficulties in printing and distributing literature, noting that publishing religious literature in the Uzbek language is prohibited, and that all other Russian-language books are subject to the Religious Committee for approval. Even if the Committee then approves the request, the materials may only be for use at the church, by members of the congregation. This means that congregation members who take literature home risk facing criminal charges, although Peichov did not cite any instances where this has occurred.

6) (SBU) Peichov states that official harassment has also increased. He stated that police have raided several prayer gatherings, taking video of the activities and forcing attendees to

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sign statements about their practices. Attendees can face fines of up to the equivalent of \$1,500 for participating in meetings determined to be in violation of the law. Two registered churches this year were each fined \$500 for not providing names of the attendees at such meetings. Peichov said that about thirty members of protestant congregations have faced criminal trials this year.

7) (SBU) Peichov also discussed his own personal difficulties, reporting that he is stopped by border guards every time he travels outside of Uzbekistan, usually about ten times per year for conferences. Guards question him about his plans, search his belongings, and hold him for about an hour each time. He stated that he needs new passport pages in his passport, but he is concerned that if he submits his passport now, he may not get it back.

"Joy" Summer Camp

8) (SBU) According to Peichov, the Union of Baptist Churches has operated a summer camp for children for the past 15 years. In the beginning, they used various leased locations, but they bought property in 2002 for the express purpose of having a permanent location for the camp. Despite the fact that one document to complete the sale has never been officially finalized, they have run the Joy summer camp from that location since 2004. They generally get 40-50 children per week, and they run the camp for eight weeks. Each child pays 7,000 sum (less than \$5) for expenses. Before attending the camp, parents and children must sign a contract, which states the mission and activities of the camp as well as the behavioral expectations for the children who attend.

9) (SBU) Last spring, a story appeared in the press about a set of parents concerned that their son, after returning home from a week at the "Joy" summer camp, was behaving differently, praying

before meals, and not playing with his friends. The parents stated they were shocked to learn that they had unwittingly sent their son to a Baptist camp. About a week later, a second article reported that an official had visited the camp and ceased its operations, citing sanitation violations.

10) (SBU) Peichov stated that the child mentioned in the press has actually attended the camp three times, and that each time, the parents and the child signed the required agreement. He stated that he believes the press story was "ordered from above," explaining that he knows that the local prosecutor's office called several parents in and pressured them to sign prepared letters complaining about the conditions of the camp. He said the boy in the press report was also pressured to sign a letter.

11) (SBU) Peichov asserted that the alleged sanitation violations were simply a pretext for closing the camp. He stated that conditions varied little from in years past, when they operated without any problems. This year, citations prohibited them from opening the camp at all.

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Criminal Charges

12) (C) In mid-July, Peichov, his assistant, and a local pastor who helps to run the camp on a volunteer basis, were all subpoenaed. Peichov has been charged with involving children in religious activities and tax evasion. The tax evasion charge is related to money parents raised amongst themselves and used for the children's transportation, food and lodging expenses. Peichov said the parents collected and spent the money, and that the Baptist Union never accepted money either in cash or through an account. Nonetheless, prosecutors say the Baptist Union should have paid taxes on this money. Peichov and his colleagues face fines of between \$2,000 and \$10,000, or up to three years in prison. The trial is scheduled to start later this week.

13) (SBU) Peichov was surprisingly sanguine about the charges he faces. While he stated that he believes the problems this summer were ordered "from above," he does not speculate on why higher-level officials would be targeting either him or protestant organizations in general. He said he believes it is simply "their turn."

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